

The Essling project. From the census to the copies.



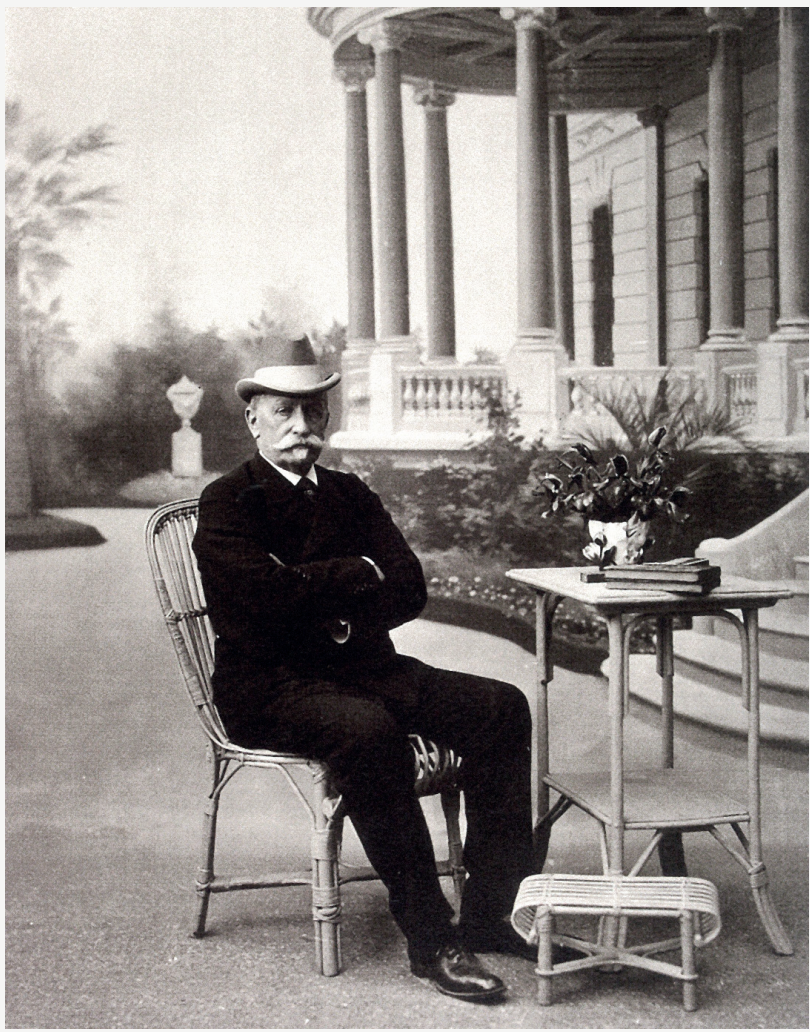
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Victor Masséna
duc de Rivoli, prince d'Essling
1836—1910

Victor Masséna (1836—1910), duke of Rivoli and prince of Essling, was a nephew of a famous Napoleonic marshal and the son of François Victor Masséna and Anne Debelle, lady in waiting of empress Eugénie, the wife of Napoleon IIIrd.

From 1885, he decided to dedicate himself to the double task of building up his exceptional collection of **Venetian illustrated incunabula and sixteenth century books**, and of studying it very systematically according to very original heuristics.
His first scholarly endeavors, purely erudite articles based on extensive archival research, were dedicated to aspects of Venetian illustration between the Quattrocento and the Cinquecento. They were mostly published in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts.

Then he published three books:
1892 *Bibliographie des livres à figures vénitiens (1469-1525)*
1896 *Études sur l'art de la gravure sur bois à Venise. Les missels imprimés à Venise de 1481 à 1600, description, illustration, bibliographiers.*
1902 *Pétrarque, ses études d'art, son influence sur les artistes, ses portraits et ceux de Laure, l'illustration de ses écrits*, with Eugène Müntz

Victor Masséna's coats of arms
as Duke of Rivoli

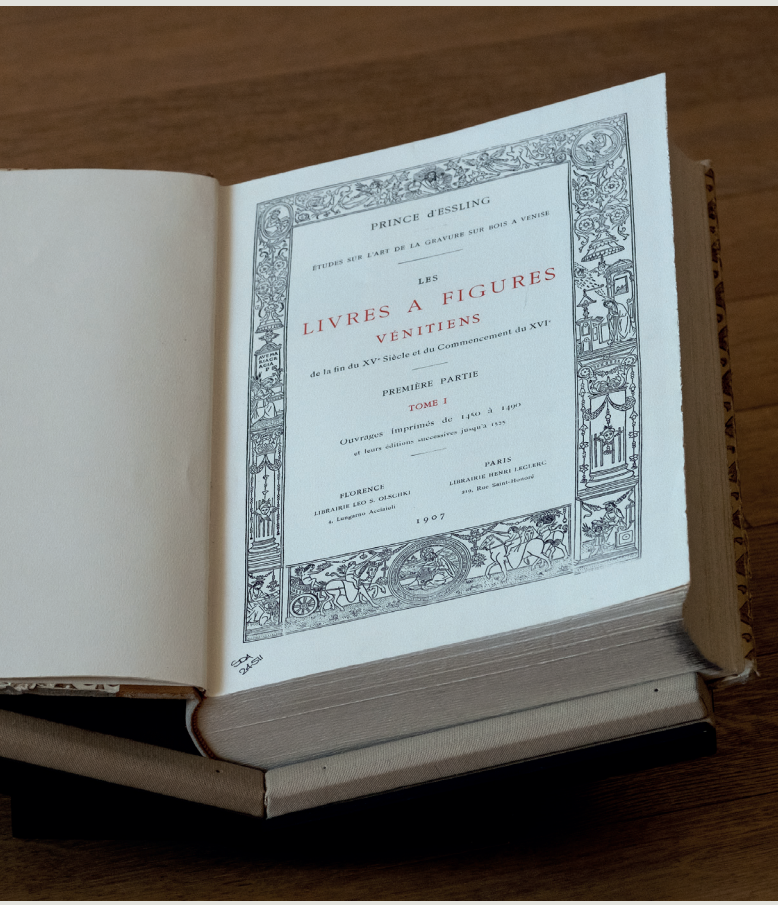


Victor Masséna's coats of arms
as Prince of Essling (from 1898)

Essling spent the last years of his life working on the book which is still his main claim to fame: the four volumes of the ***Livres à figures vénitiens de la fin du XV^e siècle et du commencement du XVI^e***, published in Florence by Olschki and in Paris by Leclerc between 1907 and 1914. Essling based his **almost 3000 descriptions** on the attentive examination of copies of each edition: his owns are identified in the catalogue by a **printed little star**.

Essling organized his census of Venetian illustrated books according to a **"genealogical" approach**. After the first illustrated edition, he indicated all successive illustrated editions until the middle years of the 16th century. Identifying the series of illustrations allows the reader not only to reconstruct a hierarchy in which take place testimonies of iconographic developments, but also to confront contemporary editions united by the same graphic style.

Today the *Livres à figures* is still THE **bibliographical reference** for the study of illustrated Venetian books. They are essential reading for the historian of the book, for the librarian, for the rare book dealer, but also for the art historian who seeks in illustrated books a mirror of contemporary art and a medium for their diffusion. The *Livres à figures* is the object of this innovative project.



Victor Masséna,
Livres à figures vénitiens
1907—1914



Apocalypsis cum figuris
Nuremberg
[Anton Koberger, for] Albrecht Dürer
1498

Apocalypsis Ihesu Christi
Venezia
Alessandro Paganini
1516
—
Essling n. 205



The Essling library

Searching for "original purity" in his copies, he submitted them to **washing, pressing and whitening of pages**, and he protected them under flashy **new bindings** decorated with his gilded monograms and coats of arms, mostly produced in the Parisian workshop of Lortie.

Chance and fortune characterized the fate of the Essling library. It was sold by the Parisian bookseller Louis Giraud-Badin to the Swiss Ulrico Hoepli who was in charge to organize a public sale in Zurich. Meanwhile, the learned Italian bookseller **Tammaro De Marinis** (1878-1969) signaled the collection to count **Vittorio Cini** who decided to buy the Venetian core of Essling's collection. The rest of the collection was dispersed during two public sales in 1939 and 1942. After keeping the Essling Venetian books in his castle of Monselice, **Cini offered them to the Foundation** that he created in Venice.

The ***Nuova Manica Lunga*** now holds the largest share of Venetian books in Essling's collection. It is exceptional that such an important collection, remarkable as a source for the history of the Renaissance illustrated book and Venetian woodcuts, remarkable also because of the quality of its copies, would have been kept almost whole.



The Nuova Manica Lunga



San Giorgio Maggiore

Using the Semantic web tools and the RDF standard, Fondazione Giorgio Cini put together an innovative **Linked Open Data** project that will provide access to all the descriptions of the *Livres à figures vénitiens* linked to the most important on-line resources and metadata sets, such as **VIAF, Iconclass, ISTC, SBN, Edit16, MEI, CERL Thesaurus, Archivio Possessori Marciana**.
Another development in providing access to the digital copies of rare books in the library will be the digitization of the books owned by Essling, linked to their description in the census. Beyond strengthening the link between the copies and the census this will allow for new research, hence new contribution for the ideal tree of knowledge.

